PITTA

Newsletter of Deccan Birders (formerly Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh)
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DECCAN BIRDERS EVENTS

In light of the Corona virus (COVID-19) epidemic, all Deccan Birders Field Trips and Indoor Meetings are on hold until further notice. Details of upcoming activities will be communicated once the situation improves.

BACKYARD BROUHAHA

Text & Photos: Sudhir Moorti K

Pied Bushchat (male)

I have been travelling like a proverbial top from my childhood, unhindered. My grandma once told me that I had *'Chakram'* on my feet and I would be roaming around all my life. God bless her soul, what more could I wish for. My mother, however, was of a very contrasting opinion. She would look at me with fire in her eyes whenever I prepared for a birding trip.

It took a lockdown to tie me down to the homestead.

Anyhoo! I started exploring the backyard and garden instead of the Western Ghats and the Himalayas.

The summer was mostly uneventful initially but later, much to my delight, a pair of Red-vented Bulbuls, some Common Tailorbirds, Purple Sunbirds and Scaly-breasted Munias started using my improvised bird bath. The Bulbuls would turn up at odd times: I would be looking out for them in the morning or evenings, but they would come for a bath in the afternoon, the rascals.

Red-vented Bulbul

The eternal vocal presence of the Asian Koel was quite pleasant, with the neighbourhood kids going "Koo-oo Koo-oo" along with the noisy fellow. Some evenings a Bulbul and a Koel would have a shouting match raising quite a din. I could never figure out why. Was the Koel trying to slip an egg into the Bulbul's nest? I wonder.

Come June and the Tailorbirds started their breeding season with the males going into a non-stop song (and dance?) and soon, we had three young fledglings hopping around on the Neem tree in front of our house.

Grey-bellied Cuckoo

The Grey-bellied Cuckoo too showed up in June, somewhat late this year. The song was an absolute treat, even though the fellow went on and on. After a few days the male was successfully able to charm the lady, I guess – I could see them playfully bouncing around the Neem tree. Soon the pair got into squabbles with Mr & Mrs Tailorbird, maybe a nest issue. I don't know if the Cuckoos were successful in fooling the Tailorbirds.

Pied Bushchat (female)

The male Pied Bushchat started singing in the mornings, such a beautiful song that brought me great joy. Couple of days later I observed the Bushchat pair fluttering around – nest site inspection? In this species the male shows the female a few possible nest sites, and the female then selects one. So I thought to myself, "Wow, that was quick!"

The nest building began; the female was doing most of the work while the lazy male sat around singing or disappeared from the scene. The nest was in a kind of hole/crevice in the construction debris (left uncleared by the neighbours) in the empty plot next to my house. I didn't try to approach the nest, as I didn't want to disturb or scare them; also the Chiku tree (*Manilkara zapota*) in my backyard was obstructing the view of the nest, and so I couldn't capture the actual process of nest-building.

However, a few days later, I began to notice that the female was absent most of the time. The incubation was on, I deduced, and started keeping a watch. Although the nest was not directly visible to me, I could see the male carrying food to the nest area, feeding the female while she was incubating. The male did not seem to share the incubation duty, but did hang around the nest most of the time.

A couple of weeks later I noticed the pair got awfully busy, scurrying to and fro with ants, earthworms and other insects in their beaks. Through the foliage I could see both the parents feeding the nestlings; at this point I didn't know how many were there. I could hear the "Chik Chik" call of the young ones throughout the day. The chicks were relentless in their demand for food. The parents alternated at intervals of 5-10 minutes in supplying regurgitated titbits to the insatiable mouths. Boy! Parenting is tough. I was glad to see that both the parents took equal responsibility in feeding the young ones. This went on for a few days.

Pied Bushchat fledgling

One fine morning I was out in the garden sipping my morning coffee, when I saw the first fledgling. All cute and speckled, he/she sat on a dry branch. Papa Bushchat was feeding him/her. Then I noticed two more on the lower branch of an adjacent bush. I came in beaming all over; my folks looked at me as if I was quite mad. I didn't bother, in fact they soon got used to me grabbing my camera and running every time the chicks started calling frantically. Indication that it was feeding time. The next day I was overjoyed to see a total of four fledglings. This was too good!

Pied Bushchat fledglings

Every day, I started watching them being fed. How they would scream their heads off when the parent approached them with food! I don't know how the parent decided which one to give the food to – possibly the loudest one got the first morsel.

Pied Bushchat fledgling begging to be fed

Slowly they started taking small flights. I thoroughly enjoyed watching them hop clumsily on the branches; I would chuckle silently while they learned to control their landings instead of crashing face first into the bush.

One day, as usual, I parked myself in my patio waiting for the show; Mama Bushchat arrived on the scene first, with a worm in its beak. She went up to the juveniles which were waiting eagerly for grub. Instead of doling out the yummy worm Mama flew to the nearby mound of rubble (the construction debris) and threw the worm on the ground.

Pied Bushchat fledgling looking for the worm in the rubble

The little ones were bewildered at first but slowly understood. One of them picked up the worm and ate it.

The female then went and pulled out another worm from the mud like she was showing them from where the worms came. Their hunting classes had started. Of course it may be conjecture on my part but I felt that Papa took the advanced classes on how to catch flying insects etc.

Day by day the juveniles started flying longer distances; they started perching on the wires. I noticed that all the juveniles were not developing equally. One guy/gal was a bit slow and was depending on the parents to bring food a little longer than the others.

Pied Bushchat in transition to adult plumage

Then the day came when none of them were seen; I kept checking the whole day but nope, no signs of them. 3-4 days later I saw one of the juveniles – he had started developing male adult plumage! *"Bacche bade ho gaye,"* I thought while grinning from ear to ear. I heard my better half mumbling something that sounded like *Paagalpan* etc etc...

I was so addicted to the whole activity every day; it had become a part of my routine. I will definitely miss them but was also glad they all had survived and made it to adulthood. Maybe I wouldn't even recognize if one of them came and nested in the same place again next year.

Indian Silverbill with nesting material

Scaly-breasted Munia

Scaly-breasted Munia with nesting material

"Well that's that," I thought. "Wait, is that a Silverbill carrying nesting material? Ohhh! An Ashy Prinia in mating display and Scaly-breasted Munia carrying long blades of grass for its nest."

Beginnings of new stories... gotta go folks!

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Notes on Observation of Barn Owl in Hyderabad, 2015-2020

Rajashekar Tummala

Barn Owl
(File photo: Srikanth Bhamidipati)

I have seen the Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) several times in Gokul Nagar, Tarnaka, in Cherlallapally near the Jail area and in Lalapet marshy area, along the discarded factories in Cherlapally area over the past five years. The locality has many old workshops and railway warehouses since the 1930s which abut our colony. In our area a lot of old Neem trees are still existing along the avenue roads. Here I have heard them calling, and have observed expelled pellets containing remnants of hair and parts of skull/bones of rodents. As these birds are local migrants, I have seen adult as well as juvenile birds.

I have tried to dispel the misconceptions of the local people and educate them about the ecological importance of the Barn Owl; also, I have tried to ensure that the green canopy and native trees in our colony are maintained, thus providing a conducive and safe environment for other avian visitors like Red-vented Bulbuls, Ashy Prinias, Common Tailorbirds, Purple Sunbirds, Rose-ringed Parakeets, etc. I have also been requesting house-owners not to hack the old dead trees, as they serve as owl perches. I have noted a marked decrease of the Lesser Bandicoot Rat (*Bandicota bengalensis*) due to the presence of Barn Owls. As a result, since more than two years, rodent control pills are not used in my apartment complex, and the water collected in the rain water pit is also pure, without any chemical traces. It is evident that the presence of Barn Owls brings many benefits.

The Barn Owl is easily identified by its heart-shaped, milky white facial disc, white underparts, and spotted brown-grey upperparts. It is in the size of a crow and primarily hunts rodents at night, mostly through sound. It is hard to distinguish whether it is a male or female while in flight, but a closer look may give a clue: females often have darker brown feathers around the rim of the facial disc, as well as darker bars on the tail and small black spots on the chest and underside of the wings.

Females are slightly heavier than males at around 360gm (males usually weigh around 330gm). However, during the early breeding season, females may weigh as much as 425gm before egg laying.

Breeding season of the Barn Owl is all through the year. Barn Owls swallow their prey whole – including skin, bones, etc – and expel or cough up the undigested material, instead of it passing through their digestive system. These owls are endowed with excellent low-light vision, and can pin-point the prey at night by sight, but also have the ability to locate their prey by sound. They can locate rodents (mice) in complete darkness, not just in controlled conditions of the laboratory – out in the real world too, they are adept hunters. A bird to observe for the night owls!

They are one of the most persecuted species in India and the Middle East owing to superstition: in dim light their white, heart-shaped face gives them a ghost-like appearance and their high-pitched shrieks are considered a bad omen.

Farmers, however, generally recognize their ecological importance and role in keeping rodents in check. They are widely used in Israel's Kibbutz farming communes, and in parts of Southern Ontario and Canada/British-Isles, for this purpose.

They are found in the forest fringes, villages, open grasslands, old buildings abutting farm lands, etc. They roost in the crevices of barns and silos near agrarian settings. They are distributed across all the continents except Antarctica.

In India, Barn Owls are protected and listed in the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 and under Schedule-IV of the Act. In Hindu Mythology, the Barn Owl is often depicted in paintings as the '*vahan'* or vehicle of Goddess Lakshmi.

Barn Owl (female juvenile) roosting on neem tree
(Photo: Rajashekar Tummala)

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Some Garden Birds of Amberpet, Hyderabad

Text and Photos: Dr G Samuel Sukumar

Tickell's Blue Flycatcher (juvenile)

The Lockdown from April 2020 onwards, due to Covid-19, brought the world to a complete standstill. With nowhere to go, I decided to concentrate on improving my garden. One morning near the end of May, I heard a familiar call of a Tickell's Blue Flycatcher (*Cyornis tickelliae*). I started to scan the undergrowth, only to see a juvenile. At first, I thought it could be an Indian Robin due its underparts being mostly greyish-brown.

I quickly brought my camera to photograph this bird. The bird only came out occasionally and did not give me a clear shot. About a week later, one afternoon, it again appeared close by and tolerated me at a distance of about 20 feet. I took the opportunity to photograph it all around the garden.

Tickell's Blue Flycatcher (juvenile)

When the garden was cleared of weeds and dry twigs it was on its job of collecting insects and caterpillars – a master in hunting. I, now, realised it was showing its presence more visibly because cleaning of the undergrowth made food available to it. Its plumage was still developing into the typical blue and orange. A few days back, in mid-July, it showed its presence again, albeit briefly. This time the plumage had already turned into its adult colours.

Purple Sunbird (male in eclipse plumage)

Red-vented Bulbul

House Crow

Birding during the lockdown was confined to our backyards. During this period I have seen many birds around the house – Purple-rumped Sunbirds (*Leptocoma zeylonica*), Red-vented Bulbuls (*Pycnonotus cafer*), House Crows (*Corvus splendens*), Asian Koel (*Eudynamys scolopaceus*), Ashy Prinias (*Prinia socialis*), Tickell's (or Pale-billed) Flowerpecker (*Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*), Common Mynas (*Acridotheres tristis*), Indian Grey Hornbills (*Ocyceros birostris*), Common Tailorbirds (*Orthotomus sutorius*), Spotted Doves (*Stigmatopelia chinensis*) and the Shikra (*Accipiter badius*).

Pale-billed Flowerpecker

Common Myna

Common Tailorbird

The Shikra, a female, gave me an opportunity to photograph it for nearly half an hour.

Shikra (female)

And the latest addition to the list was the beautiful Coppersmith Barbet!

Coppersmith Barbet

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Bird Humour

Umesh Mani

(Received on WhatsApp, July 29, 2020)

Bird of the Month

Text and Photos: Umesh Mani

Striated Heron (*Butorides striata*)

Striated Heron

Striated Heron foraging in typical habitat

(Chennai, January-February, 2015)

Order: Pelecaniformes
Family: Ardeidae
Genus: *Butorides*
Species: *B. striata*
Size: 40-48 cm

Description & distribution: The Striated Heron is a small heron and is also known as the Little Green Heron, Little Heron, Mangrove Heron or Green-backed Heron. It is a resident breeder in most of its range, from parts of western Africa east to Japan and Australia, and in South America. The adult has blue-grey, steel-grey or grey-buff back and wings (which can also have some patterning), ashy grey or white underparts with a buff wash, white chin and throat, black cap and short yellow legs. The bill has a darker upper mandible and a patchy black-and-yellow lower mandible, and a black stripe running from the base of the bill below the eye and some distance behind. The sexes are alike, while the juvenile is brownish and dark-spotted above and has streaked underparts.

Habitat & behaviour: The Striated Heron prefers small wetlands, stagnant water or slow-running streams, mangrove swamps or intertidal creeks. It is usually crepuscular, but can also be active in the daytime, especially on overcast days or in shady spots with bushes near the water. It is generally seen singly at the edge of the water or on overhanging branches, waiting patiently to ambush prey, which it usually picks up by stabbing into the water as the prey passes by. It is known to sometimes use bait, dropping a small leaf or feather on the water, and grabbing the fish that come to investigate. Younger birds sometimes give a threat display, stretching out their necks and pointing their bills to the sky. Its diet mainly consists of small fish, frogs, crabs, shrimps and aquatic insects. It is reasonably confiding, and has similar habits to, but is not seen as easily as, the Indian Pond Heron. Its flight is steady and typically heron-like, with its neck pulled in. It is a relatively silent bird, but the primary call is a sharp *keeuuk*, usually uttered in flight or as an alarm or advertising call. A sneezing *tech-aah* call and a softer *hoo* call are reported during courting.

Nesting: The Striated Heron breeds generally between March and August, with some local variations, but usually in the rainy season. However, they have been known to nest three times a year, and hence the nesting season may vary. The nest is a rough stick platform, built singly – not in colonies – in trees, bushes or shrubs overhanging water, or in a mangrove swamp. The usual clutch consists of 3-5 pale greenish-blue eggs.

Local name: The Striated Heron is known as *'Kancha bagla'* in Hindi, *'Dosi konga'* in Telugu, *'Chinna kokku'* in Malayalam, and '*Doshi kokku'* in Tamil.

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